

The Summer of the Cast

by James Folta



Oddly, one of the best summers I ever spent was the summer my little sister broke her arm. She broke it toward the end of the school year and spent the warm summer months unable to swim. My sister, Amanda, didn't mind the broken arm so much. She just hated that it kept her from doing her favorite thing: swimming.

Amanda was the happiest swimmer I have ever seen. She seemed more content in water than she did on land. If we spent a day at the beach or at a pool, Amanda would be in the water the entire day. This is not an overstatement—we would arrive and she would lay out her towel, place her flip flops carefully beside it, then walk into the water. When it was time to head home, one of us would have to walk to the water and fetch her. She would pout and protest, then do one last handstand, walk out of the water, and collect her towel and flip flops, still in the exact place she had left them.

It came as a surprise to all of us that Amanda was the first child in our family to break a bone. She was sweet and smart with messy blond hair. She preferred to sit back and puff up her cheeks, watching everything from a distance rather than get involved. She was active, but remarkably careful. She had a sense of danger that kept her from even bruising herself.

I was almost the complete opposite. My only speed was overenthusiastic, reckless sprinting. I couldn't manage all the energy I had and bounced through my childhood like a pinball. I would wake up singing and jumping and go to bed out of breath. I was always happiest when I was a little scratched up.

So we were all shocked that Amanda was the first in a cast and not me. The break happened after school one spring day on the new playground. Amanda was playing on a slider, which is a handle set into a gently inclined track. When you held onto the handle and dangled, you could slide along the track. Of course, it was more exciting to get a push from a friend and slide much faster than gravity would pull you.

Unfortunately, Amanda was pushed on the slider much too hard. Her body jerked to and fro as she sped along, clearly out of control. Finally, Amanda lost her grip and fell, arcing up and forward. She fell like a cat, twisting improbably in the air so that she descended facing the ground. For a moment, it seemed that she would be okay and land safely, but she slammed down hard on all fours, wood chips skidding around her. There was a moment of eerie calm. I expected her to burst into tears, but she just whimpered and rolled over to a sitting position. Her knees were scraped up, and her hands had wood chips stuck to them. But there wasn't any blood. She seemed okay.

We walked home and she complained about her wrist. She cradled it delicately with her other hand, as if it were a very full cup of water, but it didn't seem any more swollen or bruised than her other wrist.

When we got home, Mom could immediately tell something was wrong by our faces. "What happened?" she asked.

Mom reached out and touched Amanda's now swollen wrist. Amanda turned as white as snow and her jaw dropped open in silent pain.

"Your wrist hurts?" Mom asked. Amanda could only nod. Mom quickly whisked us into the car.

When we got inside the doctor's office, we were moved through a waiting room and then into "a checking up room," as Amanda called it. I was excitedly babbling, standing on chairs, reading brochures, and peppering everyone with questions about how x-rays worked. I was completely oblivious to the gravity of the situation. This wasn't a fun field trip. My sister was badly hurt. I don't like thinking back on my lack of care for Amanda. These are the kind of moments of childhood that you look back on and feel a pang of shame and embarrassment in your gut.

The x-rays came back-Amanda's wrist had a hairline fracture along her ulna, a forearm bone, close to her hand.

"Nothing terrible, it'll heal very soon," the doctor said nonchalantly. He didn't even look up from the documents he held before him. We were all anxious and upset. Mom was trying not to cry. I was shocked. Amanda sat calmly.

The doctor applied the cast. It looked like an arts and crafts project, more summer camp than medicine. While he set her arm, the doctor explained everything that Amanda would have to avoid to keep her arm from becoming further injured. Amanda, like I, was fascinated by the process of casting and didn't seem to be paying attention to what the doctor was prescribing. But at some point she started crying, so quietly that we didn't notice immediately.

"Are you in pain?" Mom asked.

"No."

"Are you uncomfortable?"

"No." But Amanda's face stayed screwed up in pain and discomfort, tears squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. Her legs dangling off the hospital bed kicked restlessly and crinkled the paper pulled across the table she sat on. She was upset but wouldn't say why.

Mom tried to distract Amanda by having her list all the people she wanted to sign her cast. She could only produce names in groups of two or three until she was distracted again by her tears. Mom gave up when the doctor announced that we were all done.

"Any questions?" We shook our heads. Mom signed a few papers, and we were soon back in the car, exhausted and on our way home.

Amanda didn't stop crying, and Mom kept checking in with her, barely able to hold back tears herself.

"Are you in pain?" Mom asked.

"No."

"Are you uncomfortable? Itchy?"

"No."

"Are you sad?"

"Yes," she finally admitted. "I'm not going to be able to swim this summer." She wept even harder after admitting this. In the doctor's directions for care of the cast, he had noted swimming wasn't allowed. Mom and I missed it, but it was the only thing Amanda heard. She had been told that her favorite activity of her favorite season was canceled.

The summer went on. Our fear over Amanda further hurting her arm quickly gave way to a fear of her ruining her cast by plunging it in a pool or diving into the ocean. We became preoccupied with trying to keep Amanda from soaking her cast as she sat by pools the entire summer, staring longingly at the water.

We tried all sorts of things to help her-baths, a kiddie pool in the yard, showers with her cast held out of the curtain. But of course none of this was the same as swimming. Swimming is

motion and exploration, not sitting or standing while wet.

We stopped going to pools as often as we used to. I was grouchy about it at first, but then the summer became different. Instead of the usual lazy summer days of swimming and seeing friends, I stayed home more to be with Amanda. We gardened together, staged a play, and, in what would become family lore, we planted a tree that survived both a lightning strike and being hit by a neighbor's car.

When Amanda's arm was finally healed and the cast came off, we threw a big pool party for her and all her friends. As everyone cheered, she jumped back in the pool, swam for six hours straight, and never stopped smiling. It was a great day.

But in the car on the way back home, Amanda was very quiet. After a while, she turned to me and told me how much she missed our garden.

"Maybe we could not go to the pool tomorrow?" she asked.

I told her that sounded very nice.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What was Amanda's favorite thing?

- A. running
- B. swimming
- C. reading
- D. singing

2. What main problem does Amanda face in the story?

- A. She does not get along with the rest of her family.
- B. She does not want to leave the beach at the end of the day.
- C. She cannot manage all of the energy she has.
- D. She cannot go swimming because she broke her arm.

3. When she has her cast on, Amanda misses swimming. What evidence from the story best supports this conclusion?

- A. At the pool, Amanda stares longingly at the water.
- B. Amanda's family stops going to the pool as often.
- C. Amanda staged a play and planted a tree.
- D. Amanda's family throws a pool party for her and her friends.

4. Why does Amanda start crying at the doctor's office?

- A. because she is in a lot of pain
- B. because she can't think of anyone to sign her cast
- C. because she is tired and wants to go home
- D. because she won't be able to go swimming

5. What is the story mostly about?

- A. A girl breaks her arm while playing on a slider at the playground.
- B. Two siblings learn to love swimming over the course of a summer.
- C. A girl who loves swimming discovers an interest in gardening after breaking her arm.
- D. Two siblings spend more time together when one of them breaks her arm.

6. Read the following sentences: "I was excitedly babbling, standing on chairs, reading brochures, and peppering everyone with questions about how x-rays worked. I was completely oblivious to the **gravity** of the situation. This wasn't a fun field trip. My sister was badly hurt. I don't like thinking back on my lack of care for Amanda."

As used in this sentence, what does the word "**gravity**" mean?

- A. happiness
- B. discomfort
- C. seriousness
- D. excitement

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____ Amanda loves swimming, she asks her sibling if they could not go to the pool tomorrow.

- A. Initially
- B. Meanwhile
- C. Even though
- D. Therefore

8. What did the narrator do during "the summer of the cast" instead of swimming and seeing friends?

9. Why doesn't Amanda want to go to the pool at the end of the story? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

10. How did Amanda's broken arm impact her relationship with her sibling, the narrator? Use evidence from the story to support your answer.
